

# Recalling Hydraulic Despotism: Hun Sen's Cambodia and the Return of Strict Authoritarianism

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Mirroring trends elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has witnessed a pronounced shift towards stricter authoritarianism over recent years. The state appears more firmly ruled by prime minister Hun Sen than at any time during the past three decades, while the *de facto* status of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) more closely resembles the single party regimes of neighboring states. One of the major tools of political control and expansion of authority employed by the hierarchical CPP network is the construction of major infrastructure projects, most notably hydropower dams and irrigation schemes. This article focuses attention on the hydraulic infrastructure aspects of exacting political authority and social control by the elite over the nation, drawing upon Wittfogelian perspectives for a conceptual framework. It maintains that Cambodia increasingly represents a modern variant of a hydraulic society, but primarily functions as a satellite hydraulic state of China. The growing influence of China over Cambodia's hydraulic development has helped elevate Hun Sen to resemble a neo-classic hydraulic despot. Hydraulic society concepts help provide partial understanding of contemporary power relations and party-state ascendancy, including the longevity and resilience of Hun Sen's supremacy.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism; Cambodia; Hun Sen; Hydraulic Society; Wittfogel

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of 2017-18, Cambodia demonstrably shifted towards a considerably harsher form of authoritarian governance, with several senior political opponents to the incumbent regime jailed, intimidated, exiled, or threatened with violence amidst a general crackdown on pro-democratic groups, free speech, and civil liberties (Morgenbesser, 2019). There was a rise in the use of extra-legal violence against environmental and human rights activists, including several state-linked assassinations, while a climate of impunity was widely recognized to be the norm for members of Cambodia's well-connected elite who had been implicated in a range of alleged crimes. This is not to imply that any of these symptoms of "hegemonic authoritarianism" (Morgenbesser, 2019) were not previously present, but merely that the indicator gauge of democratic freedoms had lurched further into the red zone, and few observers held any illusions that there would be a rapid reversal. The trend in Cambodia matches a general trend seen across Southeast Asia towards an authoritarian "problem region" (Einzenberger & Schaffer, 2018, p. 2; Pongsudhirak, 2018) and, indeed, a wider

global pattern of more populist, nationalist, and authoritarian regimes (Freedom House, 2017). This retreat of democracy is mirrored by a notable rise in personalist dictatorships, defined as regimes where power is highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual, changing from 23% in 1988 up to 40% of authoritarian regimes in 2017 (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, & Wright, 2017). This rise in authoritarianism comes at a time when the development of hydraulic infrastructure has been accelerating across the Mekong region, with China being the main investor.

This article begins by examining Cambodia's recent shift towards a stricter form of authoritarianism, arguing that this should be viewed as part of a longer historical trend, in part reflecting the ostensible failure of Western attempts to liberalize and democratize Cambodia (Un, 2011). This failure cannot be separated from the parallel assertion of economic and political hegemony by China throughout the Mekong region, showing its strongest expression in Cambodia in the throes of being transformed into a bulwark state for Chinese state expansionist interests over resources on land and at sea, raising concerns of neo-colonialism (Caceres & Ear, 2013). The article posits that examining these political developments through a lens that acknowledges Wittfogel's (1957) hydraulic society thesis – in particular claims that such states are generally ruled by autocratic leaders he labelled as “hydraulic despots” – would allow for a more nuanced way of understanding some of the inherent socio-political dynamics and processes at work in contemporary Cambodia, both internally and at the level of inter-state relationships. Adopting this conceptual framework allows for an examination of the contention that a key tool and mechanism used by the increasingly centralized state to enact its authority over the nation, particularly its periphery, is via the construction of hydraulic infrastructure, especially hydropower and irrigation schemes. The timeframe examined is primarily the post-Khmer Rouge period since Hun Sen's rise to power, with a strong emphasis on events of the last decade. Taking this line of argumentation further, the article proposes that Cambodia is moving incrementally towards becoming a satellite hydraulic state of China, doing its bidding on the regional geopolitical stage in return for political gifts and favors to the elite, a cultural practice that aids Hun Sen's personalized, neopatrimonial style of political rule (Un, 2011). The article is based on an extensive literature review, supported by the author's empirical observations in several provinces of recent hydraulic infrastructure developments during field visits between 2017 and 2018.

### **CAMBODIA'S RECENT SHIFT TO PERSONALIZED AUTHORITARIANISM**

The slide towards deeper authoritarianism in Cambodia culminated during the run up to the 2018 general elections. The main opposition party to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) was dissolved on 16 November 2017 by the Supreme Court, while 118 of its senior members were banned from politics for 5 years and its 55 National Assembly seats were redistributed to the CPP (Sutton, 2017). The CNRP's former leader, Kem Sokha, was accused of conspiring with foreign governments to overthrow the incumbent regime and was arrested on 3 September 2017 on charges of “treason and espionage” (Agence France-Presse, 2017). Leading Hun Sen opponent, Sam Rainsy, was earlier forced into exile in France and has little chance of being granted a safe return to Cambodia to rejoin the

political fray. In the June 2017 commune council elections the CNRP won 44% of the national vote, a result which was perceived to have rattled the confidence of the CPP about its chances of outright victory at the 29 July 2018 general elections.<sup>1</sup> Sutton (2017) argues that the deliberate break-up of the CNRP marked a “turning point” in Cambodian politics, from “a system that was relatively balanced at the elite level into a personalist dictatorship centred on Hun Sen”. He notes the death of King Norodom Sihanouk in 2012, then the demise of Senate president Chea Sim who commanded a powerful internal faction in June 2015, followed by the quashing of the CNRP, have allowed Hun Sen an opportunity to consolidate and expand his already formidable power base. Hun Sen has been quick to shrug off any foreign accusation of a power grab. Reacting to EU threats to impose sanctions on Cambodia, potentially freeze the overseas assets of senior officials, and remove Cambodia’s preferential trade status in the Everything But Arms agreement over the dissolution of the CNRP, Hun Sen berated the EU by stating,

when we break the legs of their children, who robbed and stole things from us . . . the father will be furious . . . The father is furious because his children got broken legs while they crawled to set bombs in our house (Sokhean & Kijeswki, 2017).

Hun Sen’s reference to “the children” was apparently aimed at the CNRP leadership whom he accused of fomenting “revolution”, supposedly with the help of the EU and US. The use of extreme metaphors and even direct threats of violence by Hun Sen have become increasingly commonplace in recent years. For example, during a rally for garment workers in late November 2017, Hun Sen claimed that he would have assassinated opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, had he watched a video from 29 December 2013 in which the two had apparently called on the large crowds at a non-violent protest to “organize a new government” and contest the close-run result of the earlier general elections (Niem & Chen, 2017). Hun Sen is quoted in the same source as saying,

if I had seen that at the time they would already be dead; it would be their funeral. They are lucky that I missed it. If I had watched that clip on the day they announced that, a few hours later, I would have attacked from all sides at once (Niem & Chen, 2017).

The same article reported that during the run up to the 2017 commune elections, Hun Sen had threatened “to eliminate 100 to 200 people” in the event of protests against the result, claiming this would be in the interests of national stability and security.

Simultaneously with the extensive and systematic persecution of political opposition figures and parties, Hun Sen has waged an unrelenting attack against civil society, including attempts to silence media outlets deemed unsympathetic to him, while threatening certain outspoken NGOs with violence, censure, and closure. For

1 In the event, the CPP won by a landslide, taking all 125 seats in the National Assembly and 76.9% of the popular vote. FUNCINPEC, the closest party to CPP gained just 5.89% of the vote, amidst widespread claims that the election had been “a sham” (Morgenbesser, 2018a; Prak Chan Thul, 2018b).

example, the *Cambodian Center for Human Rights* (CCHR), founded by Kem Sokha, incurred the wrath of Hun Sen at a November 2017 rally, stating that the center “must close because they follow foreigners” (Sokhean, 2017). Two months earlier, the government forced the *Cambodia Daily* newspaper to cease operations after 24 years of independent journalism, claiming it owed a USD 6.3 million tax bill (Baliga & Chheng, 2017). The final edition of the paper ran with the headline, “Descent into Outright Dictatorship”. Its closure coincided with a state clampdown on other print and broadcast media sources such as *Radio Free Asia*, *Voice of America*, and *Voice of Democracy*, amongst 15 domestic radio stations ordered shut by the Ministry of Information (Dara & Baliga, 2017). The remaining English language daily, the *Phnom Penh Post*, is now run by a Malaysian businessman with alleged connections to Hun Sen (Styllis, 2018).

By the end of 2017, accusations that Cambodia was sliding towards a fully-fledged dictatorship or autocratic state appeared more frequently in mainstream media sources (e.g., Hoekstra, 2017; Hurst, 2017; Ward, 2017). Hun Sen has shown strong indications that he aims to establish a ruling family dynasty by appointing several of his sons and other family members to key positions within the government and military (Morgenbesser, 2019; Strangio, 2014). Cambodia has been recognized as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for grassroots human rights and environmental activists, following systematic state intimidation and violence directed towards innumerable activists over recent years, a reality reinforced by the 2012 murder of prominent forest defender Chut Wutty at the hands of a military police officer (Parnell, 2015) and the assassination of political activist Kem Ley in July 2016 (Morgenbesser, 2019). In January 2018, a court jailed two environmental activists with the NGO *Mother Earth* for filming suspected illegal sand mining activity in Koh Kong province (Prak Chan Thul, 2018a).

While it seems apparent that Cambodia has become decidedly more authoritarian over the last few years, with Hun Sen more firmly at the helm than ever and driving forward new hydraulic mega-projects, how best to conceptually account for this shift towards a more centralized bureaucratic and patrimonial polity? Einzenberger and Schaffar (2018) point to the possibility that China may be serving as a role model for nearby countries, in part through its economic engagement and desire for political stability. The article proceeds by offering a brief recap of the general theory of hydraulic society via a consideration of Wittfogel’s claims concerning the peculiar quasi-theocratic nature of despotic rulers that I maintain takes on some relevance to the contemporary Cambodian context.

### WITTFOGEL’S HYDRAULIC SOCIETY THESIS REVISITED

Wittfogel (1957/1981) originally theorized that control of water through large-scale irrigation and other hydraulic works was the basis of a peculiarly “Asiatic mode of production”<sup>2</sup> and accompanied the rise of an attendant, powerful, and exploitative ruling

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2 Wittfogel devotes an entire chapter in *Oriental Despotism* to an analysis of “The rise and fall of the theory of the Asiatic mode of production” (Chapter 9), calling for its re-examination, based on the twentieth century rise of totalitarian states under the banner of ‘Marxism-Leninism’.

class (termed the “hydraulic bureaucracy”). Following emigration from Germany to the United States prior to the Second World War, Wittfogel started to substitute the phrase “Oriental society” with “hydraulic society” to indicate the water controlling mode of production and its associated social order, although he retained the former term in the title of his magnum opus, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, inviting criticisms of cultural determination or orientalism<sup>3</sup> (e.g., Robbins, 2004). Control of water for irrigation expansion purposes took on special significance in the emergence of certain early Asian societies centered on rivers flowing through semi-arid or arid environments, which differed fundamentally from the more feudalistic development pathway of most early European states, which were mostly based on rainfed agriculture. According to the theory, only a powerful and complex state organization can manage the multiple activities and problems associated with large-scale irrigated agriculture, such as its planning, construction, enlargement, operation, and maintenance, the allocation of water between upstream and downstream cultivators; the arbitration of conflicts, and tax collection functions. The hydraulic state occupied a position of “unrivalled operational leadership and organizational control” over the construction of productive and protective public works, plus the labor force required to build them (Peet, 1985, p. 8). Furthermore, Wittfogel maintained the highly centralized power afforded by technological control of water resources resulted in fundamentally despotic forms of governance found in such early hydraulic civilizations as Egypt, China, Mesopotamia, Sri Lanka, the Indus valley, and pre-Columbian Mexico and Peru.<sup>4</sup> Absolutism was presumed to be the norm, while civil society was characteristically poorly developed and routinely oppressed wherever it appeared. Wittfogel noted that these societies demonstrated particular class differentiations, labor divisions, and specialization typical of centralized urban life within a limited core area, surrounded by large interstitial and peripheral areas connected to the center.

Wittfogel (1981) maintained that a defining feature of any hydraulic society was the presence of an autocratic emperor, pharaoh, or king (often revered as a semi-divine deity), who would be responsible for playing “the decisive role in initiating, accomplishing, and perpetuating the major works of hydraulic economy” (p. 27). He referred to the existence of an organizational web for managing the hydraulic works covering the whole, or at least the “dynamic core” of the nation; emphasizing that “those who control this network are uniquely prepared to wield supreme political power” (p. 27). In considering the nature of the power of the leader of a hydraulic society, Wittfogel described it as “benevolent in form, oppressive in content” (p. 136) and noted an absence of effective constitutional or societal checks on its absolutism. Consequently, the ruler tends to “expand his authority through alliances, maneuvers, and ruthless schemes until, having conquered all other centers of supreme decision, he alone prevails” (Wittfogel, 1981, p. 107).

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3 In fact, Wittfogel identifies a number of societies lying outside the classical ‘orient’ in his classification scheme of hydraulic societies, including several in Central and South America.

4 It should be acknowledged that Wittfogel makes no mention of the Khmer empire or Cambodia in *Oriental Despotism*, suggesting he had not studied the nation in any detail and offered no opinion as to its hydraulic credentials.

## THE (RE-)EMERGENCE OF A HYDRAULIC SOCIETY IN MODERN CAMBODIA REFLECTED IN HUN SEN'S RISE

Most critiques of Wittfogel's concepts concerning Southeast Asia have primarily been interested in the context of pre-modern societies, usually paying scant attention to the theory's applicability to contemporary nation states and modern geopolitics. Price (1994) noted a tendency for some anthropologists studying irrigation to ignore Wittfogel's work "or to merely cite it to dismiss it instantly as 'reductionistic', 'simplistic', or 'mechanical'" (p. 193). Also referring to a slew of scholarly dismissals, Worster<sup>5</sup> (1992) maintained that

one of the most serious weaknesses in that literature [anthropological scholarship of the 1960s and 70s], it must be said straight off, is that the modern experience with irrigation hardly appears in it. Nowhere do the ecological anthropologists – nor does Wittfogel for that matter – seem to realise that the link between water control and social power might occur in places other than the archaic cradles of civilization nor that the past hundred years have seen more irrigation development than all of previous history (p. 30).

This criticism of a failure to consider the modern context could equally apply to some anthropological portrayals of Cambodia that have stoked a long-running debate regarding the validity of the hydraulic society hypothesis to the formation of the ancient Khmer empire (e.g., Rigg, 1992). While it is now generally accepted amongst academics that the impressive reservoir structures (known as *barai*) around Angkor were unlikely to have been built for irrigation, but rather for domestic water supply and more significantly, theocratic displays of power and religious symbolism (Mabbett & Chandler, 1995; van Liere, 1980), the irrigation trope is now part of modern Khmer folklore. The lack of an irrigational purpose has not prevented contemporary powerful irrigation promoters from regularly invoking the memory and symbols of Angkor kings in speeches and development propaganda (Hughes, 2006). Rather than disturbing historical constructions concerning early state formation, this article is primarily concerned with examining the modern Cambodian state since the end of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79), a period when wildly ambitious, poorly designed, and ecologically illiterate irrigation schemes were built with the technical assistance of Chinese advisors and the forced labor of tens of thousands of citizens, only to fail alongside the regime's own disintegration (Himel, 2007). But it is the late 20th and early 21st century experience of concerted hydraulic infrastructure expansion, the emergence of an increasingly centralized bureaucracy, and the CPP hierarchy pursuing a more subtle form of irrigation-driven social engineering than the Khmer Rouge employed, that warrants closer scrutiny with regards to the nature of contemporary modes of hydraulic governance.

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5 Worster's (1992) book *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* documents the extent to which the irrigation development paradigm of the modern "hydraulic West" has resulted in extensive ecological damage, a reallocation of power (as well as water) to bureaucratic and corporate elites, and societal conflict.



In discussing the nature of archetypal sovereigns ruling over hydraulic societies, Wittfogel noted how power was invariably concentrated and operationalized through a single, absolute leader:

In his person the ruler combines supreme operational authority and the many magic and mythical symbols that express the terrifying (and allegedly beneficial) qualities of the power apparatus he heads. Because of immaturity, weakness, or incompetence, he may share his operational supremacy with an aide: a regent, vizier, chancellor, or 'prime minister'. But the exalted power of these men does not usually last long. It rarely affects the symbols of supreme authority. (Wittfogel, 1957, p. 305)

For most Cambodians born after 1980 (in other words the vast majority, given the relative demographic youth of the nation), Hun Sen has been the only national leader they have known. He is regarded as a consummate and skillful politician throughout his career, carefully plotting a rise to power, by ruthlessly out-maneuvering rival factions and individuals at each stage to ensure no one can seriously threaten his personal supremacy (Morgenbesser, 2018b). As Strangio (2014) notes, Hun Sen has played many roles during his three decades at the apex of the Cambodian political hierarchy, including “apparatchik and reformer, strongman and statesman, demagogue and free-wheeling marketer” (p. xiii). Yet beyond these external guises, he stresses that Hun Sen has “ruled in the traditional Cambodian way, through a system of personal patronage in which money was passed upwards in exchange for protection” (p. xiii), displaying a personality that offered little tolerance for internal dissent, with a penchant for unpredictable behavior and violence when rattled.

It is pertinent to note that Hun Sen arose from relatively humble beginnings to assume the prime ministership and at one time was a Khmer Rouge cadre, yet now blithely assumes the honorific title *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo*, which roughly translates as “Illustrious Prince, Great Supreme Protector, and Famed Warrior” (Strangio, 2014, p. 116). He has actively encouraged the (re)creation of a hierarchical bureaucratic and parallel societal structure that recalls an absolute royal past, evident, for instance, in state propaganda in which the official narrative increasingly paints him as a near-legendary, rags-to-riches “peasant king” (Strangio, 2014, p. 117-119). In the manner of an Angkorian god-king, he has begun to bestow the equivalent of royal ranks to generous benefactors from the Cambodian elite, such as the title *okhna* to anyone contributing over USD 100,000 for the purpose of “national reconstruction”.

### **Hun Sen's Hold Over the CPP Strengthens and the Shift to a Hydraulic Paradigm**

Formerly known as the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), the CPP's rise to prominence dates back to the 1980s period of civil war and domestic chaos, as the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and Western governments slowly returned with financial aid, development projects, and the promise

of democracy.<sup>6</sup> Donors showed considerable interest in financially supporting a slew of irrigation development schemes as a key component of returning the country to some degree of socio-economic ‘normalcy’ and peace, even though consultants’ reports often cautioned against pushing too rapid an expansion of infrastructure, on account of a raft of technical, environmental, economic, and political risk factors (Blake, 2016). Invariably their words of caution were not heeded, with entirely new irrigation systems built or Khmer Rouge era systems rehabilitated and expanded, only to quickly fall into disrepair or be abandoned due to myriad technical deficiencies (Treffner, 2010).

Through the 1980s and 90s, the CPP emerged as the party most experienced and skilled at harnessing foreign donor-funded infrastructural development aid to benefit its own narrow interests, both as a political party and in terms of individual economic advancement. Simply put, the more senior the position attained in the party hierarchy, the greater the sense of entitlement to the spoils of development came with that office, with authority over infrastructure projects being regarded as a key reward within an entrenched patron-client gifting culture (Hughes, 2006; Norén-Nilsson, 2016; Roberts, 2002). As McCargo (2005) has argued, the CPP held virtual hegemony over Cambodian politics during the start of the 21st century, and any transition to a liberal democracy was largely illusory and wishful thinking on the part of the international community. During several coalition governments, the CPP usually ensured that its politicians controlled the most lucrative and influential government bureaucracies, including agriculture, forestry, and water resources agencies, after which it would stuff the agencies with followers in a nepotistic manner, carving out a solid fiefdom for personal enrichment (Un, 2005). In Cambodia, as is the case in Thailand (Blake, 2016), irrigation projects are invariably considered, on the one hand an integral component of an electoral strategy employed by politicians to offer rural people an incentive to vote for them, and on the other hand a means for elites to reward loyal bureaucrats, contractors, party members, and politicians (depending on their position within the patron-client hierarchy) through mutual rent-seeking opportunities during the scheme’s construction (Blake, 2019; Sok, 2012). Following the 2008-09 spike in paddy prices, the CPP referred to itself as “the irrigation party” (Thavat, 2006) and has in subsequent elections repeatedly promised rural voters greater prosperity from the construction of irrigation schemes that would supposedly allow double cropping of rice (Blake, 2016). Having *de facto* control over much of the bureaucracy, in particular the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology (MoWRAM) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), has allowed the CPP to exercise control over water flows, people, and development funds (whether domestic or international aid), with little interest in questions of equity, sustainability, or the environment (Venot & Fontenelle, 2018). The personalization of political elite gifting practices is epitomized by CPP posters featuring paternalistic images of Hun Sen and Heng Samrin<sup>7</sup> situated above pictures of state-funded infrastructure projects, including irrigation canals, that seemed ubiquitous in the countryside during the run-up

6 The KPRP formally changed its name to the CPP in 1991, less than a week before the signing of the Paris Peace Accords established the UNTAC and paved the way for ‘free’ elections in Cambodia (Frings, 1995).

7 Heng Samrin was a former army commander in the Khmer Rouge, general secretary of the KPRP from 1981 to 1991 and has been President of the National Assembly of Cambodia since 2006.



to the July 2018 elections. The CPP posters dominated those of minor party rivals in size and frequency, seen next to both relatively small irrigation projects, such as one funded by Australia in Prey Kabbas district, Takeo province (Blake, 2018a), and a Chinese-funded mega-project (albeit failed) in Prey Veng province (Blake, 2018b). That Hun Sen's party swept the board in every constituency was not surprising and points to the emergence of a hydraulic society, where all public infrastructure is ultimately associated with a single ruler and party.

With regards to the potential for national harm caused by poorly planned hydraulic development (both domestically and internationally), it is salient to note the quixotic nature of Hun Sen. This is reflected in a switch from adopting a rhetorical position of mild opposition towards large-scale hydraulic developments upstream on the Mekong river in the early years of the 21st century, including those in China, to offering unreserved support and even contemplating building its own 'mega-dams' on the mainstream Mekong in recent years, presumably reflecting altered geopolitical loyalties as main funding sources have changed. While it is most unlikely that he personally wrote the opening address for the Second International Symposium on the Management of Large Rivers for Fisheries held in Phnom Penh in February 2003, it is still instructive that Hun Sen stated that in terms of the Mekong hydraulic development, "continued upstream dam construction" and a "commercial navigation plan" were "a major concern" to Cambodia's interests, creating a worry that "the Tonle Sap could dry up, ending the famous river fishing industry" (Hun Sen, 2003).

However, even while the threats from upstream have increased, such concerns for potential social and environmental damage seem to have vanished in recent years, with Hun Sen ostensibly silent about major upstream riverine schemes, just at the time that (mostly) Chinese-funded hydraulic developments have blossomed in Cambodia and new plans are regularly being proposed. He has also advocated staunchly in favor of a mainstream dam just across the border in Laos, which a wide range of stakeholders have warned could be disastrous to fish migrations in the entire lower Mekong system (Boer et al., 2016). Since an announcement by the Laos government of the development of the 256 MW Don Sahong dam in 2014, civil society actors and Cambodian government officials have publicly expressed worries about the potential negative impacts this project might have on local communities reliant on eco-tourism and the wider Mekong ecosystem, in particular the agriculture and capture fisheries sectors of the economy (Phak, 2016). Yet after a long period of uncertainty regarding a market for the power generated by the dam, in 2016 with record low water levels on the Mekong causing negative impacts to reliant riverside communities, Hun Sen stepped up to offer a strong public endorsement of the project, shortly after it was announced that the Malaysian developer had done a deal with Cambodia (Khuon Narim, 2016). During a visit to the dam site in January 2017, he cordially thanked the Laos government "for selling cheap electricity to Cambodia" (Van Roeun, 2017). The Prime Minister, in echoes of the hydro-meteorological pronouncements of Thailand's King Bhumibol (Blake, 2015), pronounced that unusual water level changes had nothing to do with mainstream dams, but were instead the result of a capricious climate (Khuon Narim, 2016).

It was significant that Mega First Corporation Berhad, the Malaysian company developing Don Sahong with reportedly no prior experience of dam development,

invited Sinohydro Corporation to become the main contractor (Banktrack, 2016). It is unlikely to be coincidence that since the construction of the Lower Se San 2 (LS2) hydropower project began in 2014 (see section below for further details), the Cambodian government has tried to kickstart two highly controversial Mekong mainstream mega-dam projects downstream of Don Sahong, namely the Stung Treng and Sambor projects, that were previously no more than dormant plans with little international support (Peter & Ben, 2017). Like LS2, both proposed Mekong projects are under the control of the Royal Group, in association with Chinese state enterprise partners providing finance and technical capability (International Rivers, 2017). The proposed 2,600 MW Sambor hydropower project is seen by external analysts as having the most destructive potential of all the mainstream dams planned, due to its sheer size, impact on flows, and ability to block irreplaceable fish migrations at a critical point of the entire lower Mekong ecosystem (ICEM, 2010; National Heritage Institute, 2017). If constructed at full-scale,<sup>8</sup> it would lead to the resettlement of approximately 20,000 people, diminish the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands more in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, and likely lead to the extirpation of the Mekong's last population of endangered Irrawaddy dolphins (Peter & Ben, 2017).

#### THE ROLE OF CHINA IN EXPORTING A HYDRAULIC SOCIETY MODEL TO SATELLITE STATES

China, as the world's foremost dam building nation (World Commission on Dams, 2000), is considered *the* pre-eminent promoter of large dam schemes abroad. Chinese companies are said to be involved in 360 dams in 74 countries, and an estimated 39% of these projects are overseen by a single company (Sinohydro Corporation) (Yeophantong, 2016). Since the ascension of Xi Jinping to China's "paramount leader" in 2012, there has been a redirection of China's foreign policy, with Global South nations, including Cambodia, becoming enthusiastic recipients of the Chinese government's expanding penchant for overseas infrastructure construction (Caceres & Ear, 2013; Schaffar, 2018), much of it placed under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Regionally, this has been interpreted as a sign of Beijing's strategy of "peripheral diplomacy" (Callahan, 2016), or alternatively, part of a "regional soft-power offensive" southwards to ASEAN countries (Yeophantong, 2016); though neither of these terms adequately captures the extent to which infrastructure specifically can be used as a tool of interstate "technopolitics" (see Sneddon, 2015, for a study of the United States of America's own dam diplomacy attempts during the Cold War era). Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been significant investment channeled to Cambodia for implementing a range of hydraulic infrastructure projects by Chinese state-run companies, in the form of Official Direct Assistance (ODA) grants, subsidies, and soft loans, usually given with few conditions compared to those demanded by Western nations (Harris, 2016; Heng, 2012; Siciliano et al., 2016). For example, at the opening ceremony of the Chinese-funded and built Kirirom-III hydropower project in Koh Kong province in February 2013, Hun Sen (2013b) lauded that one of the advantages

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8 It should be noted that there are several possible design proposals under consideration, some less environmentally destructive than the original design, following the US-based National Heritage Institute (2017) being hired by the Ministry of Mines and Energy to study alternatives.

of Chinese investment was that it did not come with onerous debt terms for the Cambodian government to bear and that the projects all met their deadlines because they were well financed, with the backing of the Bank of China, thus helping Chinese-Cambodian relations reach “a new stage”.

Chinese investments have included the construction of numerous large non-hydraulic infrastructure projects, including Special Economic Zones (SEZs), airports, ports (Sihanoukville being the largest), highways, IT networks, electricity distribution networks, and agri-business investments, including large and controversial Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) (Sok Serey, 2017). One estimate calculated that between 1994 and 2012, China had invested a total of USD 9.17 billion in Cambodia, and Chinese companies consistently head tables of foreign direct investment (Sullivan, 2015). Another source, citing the official website of the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh, claimed that 80% of all power produced in Cambodia was provided by Chinese companies in 2016, with investment totaling USD 2.4 billion in seven plants built over the last decade (Kawase, 2017).

At a speech delivered at the opening of a March 2016 conference in Phnom Penh entitled “Getting Things Moving – Regional and National Infrastructure and Logistics for Connectivity, Growth and Development”, Hun Sen stressed that the Royal Government of Cambodia’s priorities were developing “roads, water, electricity and human” resource sectors in the national development strategy, as part of a move to improve regional connectivity and integration (Hun Sen, 2016). He welcomed the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund as key sources of finance in supporting the nation’s infrastructure investment plans.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Cambodia has become a near model client state for China in recent years, both in terms of facilitating Chinese investment in Cambodia and in supporting its foreign policy goals in Southeast Asia. Hun Sen met with Chinese premier Xi Jinping twice in 2017, reinforcing a close bond of friendship between the two. As the *China Daily* reported, “Xi called Hun Sen a good friend, old friend and true friend of the CPC and the Chinese people”, noting that “Cambodia always firmly supports China on issues concerning its core interests” (Xinhua, 2017).

A prime example of the support offered by Cambodia towards China’s “core interests” was provided in 2012 when the Cambodian government, acting as rotating chair of ASEAN, prevented the foreign ministers of ASEAN countries from issuing a joint communiqué expressing concerns about the Chinese annexation of large swathes of the South China Sea, arguing that this was merely a bilateral issue between China and the countries concerned (Kawase, 2017). The interference caused a significant degree of friction within ASEAN at the time, as all the claimants of the disputed maritime areas are other ASEAN nations and stood to lose considerable resource right claims. Cambodia has proven a staunch supporter of China’s one-country policy by recognizing its territorial claims over Taiwan, while offering up its strategic port of Sihanoukville to significant Chinese investment (Sullivan, 2015), including the construction of a new highway between the port and the capital. The apparent advantages to Hun Sen nurturing a cosy relationship with China over more onerous and less generous aid terms

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9 According to a 2017 conference on resilient infrastructure, 70% of Cambodia’s roads have been financed by China (Open Development Cambodia, 2015).

required by Western governments were once more apparent at the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) Summit, held in Phnom Penh on 10-11 January 2018. At the end of the summit, the Chinese premier Li Keqiang “signed 20 new development agreements with host Cambodia worth several billion dollars”, while simultaneously stressing “the MLC’s firm commitment to non-interference in other members internal affairs” as part of a “Phnom Penh Declaration” and prerequisite to a five year action plan (Hutt, 2018; see also Nachemson, 2018). Insisting that Cambodia would never allow a foreign country to interfere in its internal affairs, Hun Sen insisted at a February 2019 ground-breaking ceremony for a USD 50 million Chinese-funded hospital, “China’s approach to foreign policy is that it does not want to control any countries [sic]. China only wants to develop friendships around the world” (Lipes, 2019).

The author contends that an important aspect of the deepening bilateral relationship between the two states is Cambodia’s emergence as a satellite or peripheral hydraulic state of China, adding a new dimension to the hydraulic society hypothesis. This is manifested by the numerous, but rather opaque, Chinese-funded hydropower and irrigation schemes steadily appearing that are fundamentally altering the socio-natural landscape in a manner not seen since the Khmer Rouge era. According to Macan Markar (2013), Chinese investment in hydropower projects in Cambodia amounted to USD 1.6 billion in 2013 and was described as, “the most potent symbol of bilateral ties between the two countries”. The largest and most controversial of the schemes constructed thus far has been the USD 816 million LS2 hydropower project in northeast Cambodia, built by a consortium including China’s Hydrolancang International Energy Co. Ltd. (51% share), the Royal Group (39% share), and Electricity of Vietnam International Joint Stock Company (Harris, 2016). Construction commenced in 2014, and the controversial 400 MW installed capacity hydropower project was completed in December 2018, with a grand opening ceremony attended by Hun Sen (Soth Komsoeun, 2018). Financing for the project has reportedly come from shareholder company capital (30%) and an undisclosed loan from a Chinese bank (70%), believed to be the China Development Bank (Banktrack, n.d.). Some 4,800 people were resettled for the project’s reservoir, and a further 80,000 people could be affected through loss of migratory fisheries and other environmental impacts. Much domestic and international criticism has been directed against the developers for inadequate levels of compensation and rights afforded to affected communities (Harris, 2016), while several villager and NGO protests have been violently suppressed by state forces. However, the criticism seems to have made little difference to the eventual outcome. The chairman of the Royal Group, Kith Meng, controls extensive banking and business interests and is known to have close links to Hun Sen (Powell, 2011).

Besides LS2, China has been involved in the construction of at least seven large dams in Cambodia, including the 194 MW Kamchay hydropower project in Kampot province developed by Sinohydro; the 18MW Kirirom III hydropower project in Koh Kong province developed by State Grid Xin Yuan company; the 338 MW Lower Russei Chrum hydropower project in Koh Kong province; the 246 MW Stung Tatay hydropower project developed by China National Heavy Machinery; the 120 MW Stung Atay hydropower project in Pursat province developed by Datang Corporation; and the 12 MW Kirirom I hydropower project in Kompong Speu province, developed

by China Electric Power Technology Import and Export Corporation, a subsidiary of the State Grid Corporation of China (Grimsditch, 2012). In addition to these existing projects, other Chinese corporations exploring the potential of developing further hydropower schemes in Cambodia include China Gezhouba Group Corporation, Huadian, China Southern Power Grid, and China Guodian Corporation (Grimsditch, 2012).

To take one example from the above list, the Kamchay dam built between 2006 and 2011 by Sinohydro at an estimated cost of USD 311 million was financed by the China ExIm Bank as part of a USD 600 million aid, trade, and investment package extended to Cambodia. The project was “strongly supported and driven forward by the Cambodian Prime Minister” (Siciliano et al., 2016, p. 3) and became the first of a series of large dams built with Chinese money. Indeed, the dam was officially opened by Hun Sen in December 2011, the same year that China and Cambodia deepened bilateral relations with a “comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation” (Sullivan, 2015, p. 123). On the basis of fieldwork conducted around the dam site and stakeholder interviews, Siciliano et al. (2016) conclude that within Cambodia, “the political alliance at the top level crushes much opposition or concerns at the local level” (p. 13). They note that while local people had suffered immediate and perpetual losses of livelihood and access to natural resources as a result of the Kamchay dam, mostly uncompensated, the developers would receive potential benefits from electricity revenue over 44 years under a Build, Operate, Transfer (BOT) agreement. There appeared to be a singular lack of communication between Sinohydro and relevant bureaucracies on the one hand and impacted persons on the other hand at each stage of planning, construction, and operation, including sudden releases of water leading to downstream flooding, probably reflecting the inter-elite nature of this project and prevailing power inequities in Cambodia (Siciliano et al., 2016).

### **Beyond Hydropower – Chinese-Funded Irrigation Development Schemes**

Beyond the hydropower sector, China has also been *the* major bilateral aid donor and source of loans for irrigation development by a significant margin. After the transport sector, irrigation infrastructure accounted for the second largest target of state funds between 2008 and 2012, with much of the funds being channeled towards constituencies that support the CPP (Blake, 2019). A list of agricultural water management sector infrastructure projects derived from an Asian Development Bank *Inception Report* suggested that China had loaned USD 601 million on seven projects for the period from 2010 to 2015, putting it far ahead of all other bilateral and multilateral aid donors involved in the sector (Pech et al., 2013). This sum included a purported USD 260 million figure for constructing two phases of the Vaico River Irrigation Development Project in eastern Cambodia,<sup>10</sup> supposedly completed in 2015 but which was in a non-operational mode when the author visited the area in March 2017 (Blake, 2017) and again in July 2018 (Blake, 2018b). This project was built to supply irrigation to a large area of poor-quality land in an area that does not drain well in the

10 The project was awarded to Guangdong Foreign Construction Co. with the Cambodian government securing a reported concessionary loan from the Export-Import Bank of China. It has a targeted irrigation command area of 300,000 ha across Prey Veng, Svay Rieng and Kampong Cham provinces (Blake, 2017).

wet season and was deemed “marginally suitable” or “not suitable” for irrigated agriculture investment by a Western consultant’s report in the early 1990s (Blake, 2017). The field visits revealed that not a single hectare of land has been irrigated by the scheme, despite the digging of a reported 78 km of canals and associated hydraulic infrastructure, pointing to a fundamental technical design flaw by the joint Chinese designers and Cambodian bureaucratic agencies involved. Despite the outright failure of Cambodia’s most extensive and expensive irrigation scheme, tellingly there has been no discernible outcry from domestic civil society, academia, or the media. While Western-funded irrigation schemes elsewhere have also suffered from abandoned, non-functional, or partially-functional infrastructure over many years and attracted some criticism as a result (Blake, 2019; Treffner, 2010), the Vaico project represents the most striking example of a transnational cultural gifting phenomenon that benefits few beyond national elites, but harms many. That it is being implemented in plain sight (a brief reconnoiter of the relevant Google satellite image of Prey Veng is instructive) yet simultaneously obscured from public view or discussion, points to a cowed populace fearful of retribution should they speak out against such monumental examples of environmental destruction, corruption, and official ineptitude.

### **CONCENTRATING POWER THROUGH HYDRAULIC MODES OF GOVERNANCE**

The consequences of this remarkably rapid hydraulic infrastructure development trajectory have been profound and have been felt beyond the geographical limits of the individual projects themselves to affect state-society relations from local to national levels. This is a result of both the concentration of wealth and political power that the hydraulic development paradigm enables amongst elites, but also due to the altered characteristics of Cambodia’s party-state machinery and associated centralization of bureaucratic power, now under the control of a single tyrannical ruler similar to that envisaged by Wittfogel. Hydraulic infrastructure, in particular large-scale irrigation, offers potential opportunities to create order and stability through its re-configuration of the rural landscape, a key concern of the Cambodian elite (Springer, 2009) and inherently recognized by Pol Pot and Chinese Maoist state backers during the Khmer Rouge period (Bultmann, 2012). There are now distinguishable similarities between some aspects of the Khmer Rouge ideological discourse over irrigation development and that of the present regime’s visions (Blake, 2019).

As with the case of China and its “controlocracy” (Ringen, 2016), Cambodia now employs a two-tier system of socio-political control, with an interdependent bureaucratic state and single dominant party, where the state controls society and the CPP controls the state (Hutt, 2017). Each large-scale hydraulic project built offers multiple opportunities for the state to incorporate previously unrealized social engineering potential and subjectivization of marginalized peoples (Scott, 1998). Imposing a supposedly modernizing, technological solution, whether a hydropower dam, flood control project, or irrigation scheme on a river system allows for a fundamental reordering of society according to (dis)utopian, state-centric visions. This implies the forced mass movement of people from the reservoir footprint to resettlement sites, allowing for the imposition of state and expert-led development practices, processes, and propaganda that invariably leave those impacted considerably worse



off economically and socio-culturally more impoverished than before (see Scudder, 2019, for examples from across the developing world). The administrative gridlines that water control, irrigation canals, and parallel roads create, provide enhanced opportunities for authoritarian states to more easily subjugate citizens in line with the will of the ruling elites, weakening any remnants of civil society in the process. It unfolds in a more hegemonic and less coercive manner than during the forced *corvée* labor parties of the Khmer Rouge era (Bultmann, 2012), but nevertheless still leads to the incapacitation of local initiative and suppression of opposition voices.

Blake and Barney (2018), for example, document the case of the Theun-Hinboun hydropower dam, which became a vehicle for the increasingly authoritarian Lao state to impose its will and vision on subaltern peoples, described in terms of “structural injustice and slow violence”. There are strong parallels between the contemporary socio-political paradigms of hydraulic infrastructure development in Laos and Cambodia. At the same time, there seems to be sufficient evidence to suggest that the open armed receipt by Hun Sen of significant amounts of Chinese development grants, loans, and technical assistance to construct numerous large-scale hydraulic infrastructure projects, conducted under a cloak of opacity, is pulling Cambodia away from traditional close links to Vietnam’s polity towards China’s embrace. China’s domestic approach to hydraulic development has always been to first attend to the construction of infrastructure on a grand scale, which has allowed for the exertion of greater social control and bureaucratization from the center, leaving concerns about actual demand for water or electricity to later. This has led to the vast over-supply of hydropower capacity such as that currently found in Yunnan (Kynge & Hornby, 2018). China seems to currently export this development model to other countries and, creating satellite hydraulic states in the process.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Cambodia is tending towards certain characteristics that resemble a modern variant of a hydraulic society, in particular the rise of an unashamedly autocratic ruler directing the workings of a state that is increasingly organized along hydraulic lines. Cambodia clearly does not exhibit a typical hydraulic core configuration, as found in a number of other classical hydraulic societies, which were established in discrete arid or semi-arid large river basins. The topography, climate, and hydrology of Cambodia are significantly different from that found in the ancient hydraulic societies, but rather the landscape lends itself to what Wittfogel (1981) termed “hydro-agriculture” (p. 3), with most agriculture relying on rainfed and flood recession conditions. However, in Cambodia’s case these limitations have not formed an obstacle to the whims of an aspiring hydraulic ruler wanting to (re-)create a hydraulic society, buoyed on by the influence and technological assistance of an expansionist Chinese hydraulic state and nationalist visions of past Khmer greatness. Indeed, the inherent geo-physical limitations help to explain the failure of a series of large-scale irrigational developments, spectacularly demonstrated again by the Vaico river project. By adopting a ruthless approach that has virtually destroyed all internal opposition, Hun Sen now commands the state polity in a similar manner to past

rulers of classical hydraulic societies. Examples such as the Se San 2 and Vaico projects, where local people impacted are cowed by fear to protest, tend to confirm one of Wittfogel's (1981) key observations concerning the despotic nature of the ruling class of hydraulic states and a corresponding weakened civil society, described as a "beggar's democracy" (p. 108). Without a doubt, he has attained supreme operational authority over the nation and demonstrated Machiavellian adroitness by deepening control of the most important institutions of statecraft.

Morgenbesser (2018b) has described Hun Sen's Cambodia as a "party-personalist dictatorship", a state of affairs that recognized the ruler's tendency towards an autocracy that relies on the complete dominance of the CPP. As I have argued, such an analysis overlooks the hydraulic control dimensions of this style of statesmanship, which is best accounted for through Wittfogel's hydraulic society hypothesis. The Cambodian government has over a relatively short period of time allocated escalating resources for the construction of grandiose hydraulic infrastructure projects, which in many instances are designed, bankrolled, and constructed by Chinese state-owned enterprises, with the implicit (and occasional explicit) benediction of Hun Sen and Xi Jinping. Whether Hun Sen or his immediate family have directly profited from the massive Chinese investment in such projects over the last decade can only be speculated upon due to the opacity surrounding the finances of such deals conducted between secretive regimes. Thus, this article may be seen as tentatively contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Wittfogel's hypothesis in the light of recent geopolitical developments where a weak state has fallen into the patron-client orbit of a deeply entrenched and powerful hydraulic state to emerge as a new form of hydraulic society on the periphery. This contention is worth further investigation in future research.

While the lines between authoritarianism, autocracy, and despotism are patently blurred, it is apparent that many of the concrete actions taken by the Hun Sen regime in the last few years reflect an autocratic tendency to centralize control and destroy any credible political opposition, including rivals within the ranks of the CPP. The last two years have demonstrated that Hun Sen's firebrand public rhetoric is frequently matched by violent and coercive actions, leading to a severely diminished civil space in Cambodian politics, replaced by fear and self-censorship amongst its citizens. However, while Hun Sen closely resembles a Wittfogelian hydraulic despot and is being helped in this quest by the actions of China, this does not imply that Cambodia is or ever will be a strong hydraulic state, as it lacks the necessary basic environmental conditions. At best, it can function as a weak, satellite hydraulic state under the ultimate suzerainty of China, which will continue to dominate Cambodia at the expense of any former influence exerted by Western states and Vietnam, as altered geopolitical poles reflect new hegemonic realities.



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